

Healed Heart

By Kurt D. Springs

Myles Drake walked to the mantle of his cabin's fireplace. He had retired from the Marines two years before. After an eventful life, he sought quiet. The Central Alaska wilderness was perfect for quiet.

He smiled at the pictures of the Marines he had the honor of knowing. His mind drifted back to his first time in combat in Iraq. He had just finished training with Force Recon. It was his first combat HALO drop. He had executed it flawlessly. However, that was the last thing to go right.

He closed his eyes as the sounds and screams came back. In his mind's eye, Myles saw his platoon leader and platoon sergeant go down; his fire team leader fell. He had to start shouting commands. They got out and finished their mission, but the cost... He shook his head firmly. With the Corps' blessing, he had earned associate degrees in both Firearms Technology and

Mechanical Engineering. When assignments and time allowed, he took additional courses.

During a lull between missions, he took a post at the consulate in Bologna, Italy. With some free time, he continued his education at the University of Bologna. A professor there persuaded Myles's superiors to allow him to complete his bachelor's degree at the university. That was when he met Anna. He closed his eyes and remembered how her smile could light up the room.

He kept in touch with her as best he could, given the circumstances. Then, at Colonel Holland's suggestion, he completed his master's degree. With qualifications accumulating, he became a gunnery sergeant.

That was also when Anna wanted him to leave the Corps.

"I don't want to worry that you'll come home in a box," she told him firmly.

Colonel Holland knew Anna's father, who had settled in California and started his own engineering firm. Anna was excited

about the projects they could work on. Nine Eleven was only a few months old, and Myles had mixed feelings.

The problem started as soon as he entered the building for his interview and a tour. Something felt off. Not Anna's father, Tony, nor anything else, but there was a palpable sense of hostility he could not identify. Someone did not want him there.

Tony invited him to the Christmas party. A delighted Anna took him into town and found a suit that was as far from a military in style as she could find while still being professional. She had gushed at how handsome he looked. She had to get to the plant early but assured him security would allow him in.

Myles traced the line of her jaw in the picture. It had not gone that way.

When he arrived, the guard informed him that his name was not on the list. His request to speak with Mr. Anthony Armato was met with a threat to have him arrested if he did not leave.

Myles left the building and contacted a friend to tell him he was reenlisting. Charly offered to handle the paperwork for him.

After that, Myles called Anthony and left him a message, saying that if he did not want to hire him, he should have said so instead of humiliating him.

He left the hotel and never looked back. He spent the next five years riding “the crazy train.” He traveled with his Recon unit from Afghanistan to Iraq to Kenya. Along the way, Myles had bought a cabin north of Fairbanks, Alaska. He wanted a place where he could enjoy some tranquility between deployments.

She appeared out of the blue. Myles had landed at Fairbanks to go on leave when he saw a familiar figure that he had not seen in six years approaching. His heart raced. Anna marched toward him, her expression resolute.

Myles did not know what to expect. She stopped a few steps away and gazed at him.

“You are looking well, Myles.” Anna appeared cautious, as if unsure of her welcome.

“You look beautiful, Anna.”

Anna smiled for a moment before taking his arm. "Can we talk?"

Myles nodded and guided her to a restaurant in downtown Fairbanks, where they took a private booth.

She played with a stray hair. "Please, Myles, don't hate me."

"I never hated you," he replied. "But the guard telling me he would have me arrested if I didn't leave... I know when I'm not wanted."

Anna looked down. "I don't know what happened. Father had his secretary add your name to the list. I watched her send it to security myself."

Anna shook her head. "Father was disappointed when you didn't show. His new engineer. He was looking forward to showing you off. He didn't have time to check his messages. He and mother had to make the airport to leave on a trip with Colonel Holland and his wife to celebrate the colonel's retirement. I saw the light on his phone flashing. When I heard your message, I ran down to security. The guard was about to shred the list. I took it.

Your name was gone. I found Isabell, and we both looked. She had put your name on the list.”

Tears welled in her eyes.

“Technical glitch?” Myles asked.

“That’s what we thought, at first,” Anna replied. “Now, I’m not so sure. I think someone intercepted the list and removed your name.”

Myles frowned. “I knew something was off.

Anna gazed at him.

Myles took a deep breath. “As soon as I walked in, I sensed hostility in that place. It’s an important survival instinct when you work in special operations. You always need to know when someone might try to kill you.”

“How much time is left on your enlistment?”

Myles frowned. “Six years. I just reenlisted. The Marines asked me to take part in a new program. I’m not permitted to say more than that.”

Anna’s face fell. Myles took her hands.

“Anna,” Myles pushed on. “I let you go before, but I’ve thought about you every day since then. Do you think you can marry a Marine? I know I’m keeping company with death, but the thought of you reminds me I have something to live for.”

She offered him a wistful smile. “Let me think about it. When do you deploy again?”

“End of the year.”

“Let’s meet in San Jose before you ship out. I want to talk to Momma and Papa first.”

Myles smiled. They hugged, and she left Alaska the following day.

Two weeks later, he received word that a local gang had murdered her. They said her father died of a broken heart, and her mother followed soon after.

A tear fell on the picture. Anna was beautiful, with her dark hair and eyes embodying classic Mediterranean beauty.

He had raced to San Jose, where a detective and an FBI agent intercepted him. They took him to the station to question him about his discussions with Anna.

Noticing Myles's rage with growing alarm, the detective said, "Master Sergeant, just continue with your deployment and let us deal with this. Don't try to find them yourself."

The FBI agent echoed the sentiment. "We'll find them, Master Sergeant."

Master Sergeant Myles Drake followed their advice. Eventually, he achieved the rank of Master Gunnery Sergeant. There had been many opportunities to die, yet he believed Anna would have been disappointed in him if he did not keep fighting to live.

He sighed as he placed her picture back on the shelf and adjusted it.

Suddenly, an explosion erupted. Instinct kicked in. Myles crouched, waiting for more blasts, his hand going to the pistol he

kept on his hip. As he reached the door, Myles noticed a glow in the north.

He raced inside, put on his winter jacket, and grabbed his shotgun. It was old school: a Winchester 1912 in 12 gauge—a trench sweeper. Myles opened his shed and started his snowmobile. He took a first aid kit and other tools he thought he might need. Then he roared into the Alaskan night.

Myles had traveled about ten miles when he came upon the crash site. It resembled something out of science fiction. Ready to render aid or defend himself, he jumped off his snowmobile and raced toward the stricken craft. It was a strange craft with metal that changed colors. He found a breach in the hull and made his way through a smoke-filled corridor. Staying low, he dropped glow sticks to mark his path as he searched for survivors.

In what seemed to be the cockpit, he found three individuals. Two smaller figures huddled around an adult. They appeared humanoid, with shimmering blue skin, white hair, and golden

eyes, along with what looked like antennae. The adult appeared to be male, while the children were female, possibly six and ten years old. The children looked unhurt, but the adult... Myles could tell the wound was mortal.

The adult opened his eyes and weakly reached for something resembling a microphone on his neck.

“Please, don’t hurt them.”

The voice sounded mechanical—some kind of translator.

“I won’t,” Myles said. “I’ve got to get you out of here. This thing is going to blow.”

The adult shook his head. “I’m going to die, anyway. Get them out of here.”

Myles shook his head. “I won’t leave anyone behind.”

Myles reached behind him and shook out a *travois* he usually used to tow supplies. “Tell them to keep ahead of me and follow the light sticks.”

The alien nodded weakly. After securing him to the *travois*, Myles herded the girls ahead of him while dragging the injured

alien. Breathing grew more difficult as they continued to push forward. Myles could tell by the sounds of the systems around him that this ship wouldn't last long.

After what felt like an eternity, they emerged into the open. Myles attached the *travois* to the snowmobile and positioned the girls behind him.

“Hold on tight.”

Even though they did not understand English, they knew what they needed to do. Myles gunned the engine and took off.

The explosion, when it came, nearly spilled them from the snowmobile. Only Myles skill kept them under control. He glanced back. There was nothing left but a hole in the ground. He reached behind him to the youngest girl, then to the older one, reassuring them. Then, he steered his snowmobile toward his cabin.

The alien male was weaker as they arrived at the cabin. Myles ushered the girls inside and then carried the alien to the couch.

“You were foolish to risk your life for me,” he wheezed through his translator. “I’m dying.”

“Leave no one behind,” Myles quoted. “Dead or alive. A code people here live by.”

The alien gasped. Myles went to retrieve something—anything that might help—but the alien seized his arm.

“I have little time,” he gasped. “I am the children’s protector. The Koreg are hunting them. I fear your people may hunt them as well.”

Myles’s face darkened. “You’ll be happy to know, I know how to deal with bullies.”

“I must pass my duties to you,” the alien whispered. “I have failed.”

Myles gripped his hand.

“No! You kept them alive,” Myles reminded him. “I will protect them with every fiber of my being.”

The alien smiled, gasped, then looked out into eternity.

Myles checked for a pulse. He was gone. The two girls hugged each other and cried as Myles closed their protector's eyes.

Myles buried the alien in the backyard. The older girl took the translator and attempted to assist.

"His name was Ezellor," she told him through the translator.

He nodded and wrote Ezellor's name and date of death on a marker.

"What are your names?" Myles inquired.

The older girl hesitated. "My name is Siraian. This is my sister, Pelleria."

"Never had the chance to be a parent," he told them, "but I'll do my best. I'm Myles. Myles Drake."

He brought them back inside, realizing they were both shivering.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should have found appropriate clothes for the weather."

He brought them to the fireplace so they could warm up.

“I’m not sure what you can and can’t eat,” Myles warned. “It might involve a lot of trial and error. If it makes you sick, I will never feed it to you again.”

Siraian nodded. “We are carbon-based. If it kills us, it will kill you.”

“True,” Myles replied, “but some items, like caffeine, for instance, you might find you’re more sensitive to than a human is.”

Siraian nodded once more. “We can try it, as you suggested.”

“I may have to go into town for more supplies,” Myles told her. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

Pellera looked around the cabin. She paused at the fireplace mantle and pointed to the picture of Anna, making a sound of inquiry in her language.

“Pellera says she’s beautiful,” Siraian translated. “She wants to know who she is.”

“Her name was Anna Armato,” he stated. “I was going to marry her.”

Pellera faced him with a curious expression.

“She died twenty-five years ago.”

Pellera appeared horrified and stammered something.

“She says she’s sorry,” Siraian whispered.

“She didn’t know,” Myles replied.

He walked to the refrigerator. “Can you eat meat?”

“Yes,” Siraian said.

He took out some venison, potatoes, and vegetables. “I want to suggest something. I think you should turn off the translator.”

Siraian looked at him.

“I don’t know how long it will last without a recharge,” Myles continued. “So, we need to learn how to communicate without it as a crutch.”

Siraian turned it off. As he prepared the meal, they began to learn each other’s languages.

Fortune smiled upon them. Nothing Myles fed the girls upset their stomachs. They loved the hot chocolate. They both picked up English much faster than Myles learned the Xialarian language, which is how they referred to themselves.

Two days later, he decided he could not put off going to Fairbanks. Not wanting to leave the girls alone, he brought them to his neighbor's house. Mrs. James was an older woman whose children were grown and seldom got to see her grandchildren since they lived in Georgia.

She gave him a curious look as he arrived with two young girls dressed in winter clothes that were several times too big.

"Myles," the older woman said, "what are you up to?"

Myles gave her a sheepish grin. "I had a slight problem dropped into my lap, and I need your expertise to sort things out in something other than my makeshift attempt."

"Yes," she replied, eyeing the two figures who huddled close to their protector. "Well, why don't the three of you come inside and tell me all about it?"

Once they were inside her house, the girls unwrapped their coverings. Mrs. James's eyes widened in surprise.

"This is going to be more interesting than I thought," she murmured.

Myles told her what happened while she served the girls milk and cookies.

"So," he concluded. "I've given my word. I am now serving as their protector. The problem is, I've never taken care of children, let alone little girls, before."

"And that's before we start on the fact that they aren't part of the human species," Mrs. James finished, not bothering to hide her amusement. "Well, my grandchildren are all boys when they visit at all. I can let Siraian and Pelleria have some of my daughters' old things."

"The thing is, hiding their less-than-human characteristics," Myles said. "Their guardian was right. That explosion won't go unnoticed. Our government will be interested. I'd like to think that

even the most thoughtless bureaucrats would at least have a crisis of conscience before hurting them, but...”

“As a Recon Marine and a Marine Raider, you are familiar with the concept of hiding in plain sight.”

Mrs. James was better than her word. Soon, the girls had several changes of clothing, including winter clothes that fit much better and, at the same time, concealed the features that could prove difficult to explain away.

“I don’t know,” Mrs. James grinned at them. “I think those antennae are cute when they wiggle like that.”

Her statement made the girls giggle. Myles smiled. Their childish laughter was a pleasant sound.

“We’re going into Fairbanks,” Myles said. “Do you need anything?”

“I’ve been meaning to go in and get some eggs and milk,” Mrs. James said. “That would save me a trip.”

“Do you want to come with us?” Siraian piped up.

Understanding how lonely she felt since her husband, Sergeant Major James, had passed away, Myles smiled. The one thing these two were was perceptive.

“Let me get my coat,” Mrs. James said immediately. “My truck is bigger.”

Myles grabbed the keys, and the four of them climbed into Mrs. James’s Dodge Ram.

The conversation in the truck between Mrs. James and the two girls was lively. The girls shared stories about their world, while Mrs. James told them more about Earth.

“Myles, here, could have been an officer,” Mrs. James was telling them. “He received the education. He’s quite capable. Do you know his house and mine are the only two that are nuclear powered?”

Myles started. “Mrs. James...!”

“They’re bound to figure it out, eventually, Myles,” Mrs. James said archly. “They are quite intelligent.”

That elicited more giggles.

“It is a secret. Certain people would be very upset. If you want to avoid trouble for us, keep it between the four of us.”

“As much as I like to tease him about hiding his talents, I’m afraid Myles is right. People in authority can be more inclined to throw those who find clever solutions to problems in jail rather than praise their ingenuity.”

Siraian frowned. “Why would they do that?”

“If you want a simple explanation, people who are clever threaten their power,” Myles explained. “If you discover a method to do things that doesn’t fit into their preconceived little boxes, they get very nervous.”

Siraian nodded. “The Koreg are like that. That’s why they fear us. It’s so sad.”

They turned a corner on Route 2, and soon the city of Fairbanks appeared before them.

Both girls gazed out the window at the city.

“It may be primitive,” Myles said, “but this is the hub of activity in this part of Alaska.”

They all had fun in Fairbanks. Myles and Mrs. James stocked up on groceries, and then they took the girls on a tour of the city.

What the girls truly loved was the bookstore. Mrs. James guided them both to books that were appropriate for their age. She even suggested books that Myles might enjoy reading to them. The thought made Myles feel both uncomfortable and intrigued at the same time.

They waited until nightfall so the girls could see Fairbanks illuminated. What excited them were the Northern Lights.

The Northern Lights continued to flicker in the sky as they drove back to Mrs. James’s house. The girls appeared mesmerized by the display.

“Why does it do that?” Peller asked.

Myles was about to answer when her older sister chimed in. “It happens when the charged particles from this system’s star collide with this planet’s magnetic field.”

Myles smiled at Mrs. James. “Very good, Siraian. Now, tell me, does knowing how it works make it any less beautiful?”

Siraian shook her head. “I’ve only ever heard about Polar Light Storms. To see one...”

Her voice trailed off.

By the time they arrived at Mrs. James’s house, the girls were nodding off.

Myles picked up Peller’s and took Siraian’s hand, leading them back to his truck.

“You made the trip fun,” Myles told the older woman. “Thank you.”

“I think they’ll be good for you,” she replied before kissing his cheek. “Have a good night and swing by anytime.”

With a wave, he climbed into his Jeep Gladiator and drove back to his cabin.

George Mason was another former Marine, now serving as sheriff the Fairbanks North Star Borough. It took him and two of his deputies a week to find the impact crater.

“This doesn’t look like a meteor hit,” his detective, Helen Hunt, observed.

Sheriff Mason nodded as he scanned the area. Pieces of strange metal appeared scattered throughout the place. If someone did not know what to look for, they would have overlooked it.

“An airplane crashing and exploding would have left recognizable debris,” Sergeant Jones remarked.

Once again, the sheriff merely nodded, attempting to process the apparent impossibilities. Prior to serving as a sergeant in his department, Sergeant Jones had been a technical sergeant in the Air Force. He had conducted crash site reconstructions many times.

“Sheriff,” Detective Hunt pointed to a snowmobile track.

“That’s in the direction of Master Gunnery Sergeant Drake’s cabin,” the sheriff observed shrewdly. “And he has a snowmobile.”

Sergeant Jones suddenly tensed up. “Sheriff. Choppers.”

“Pull back to the tree line,” the sheriff whispered. “Get undercover.”

Fortunately, what happened here had melted the snow, and they did not make tracks on the frozen ground. Five minutes later, two unmarked helicopters landed. Twelve men deplaned and began searching the area. The sheriff picked up snippets of Spanish as the men searched. They collected pieces of debris and bagged them. The sheriff immediately became suspicious. He glanced at his deputies and saw Sergeant Jones frown in professional disgust.

Soon, the men boarded the helicopters and flew back in the direction they had come. Once the sound of the helicopters faded into the distance, they broke cover.

“Those guys didn’t know the first thing about crash investigation,” Sergeant Jones noted.

“Did you hear them?” the sheriff asked. “They spoke Spanish.”

Detective Hunt looked at him. “Could they be CIA?”

“The CIA wouldn’t send a team that was just one ethnic group,” the sheriff replied. “And they would have been a damn sight more professional.”

“Agreed, Sheriff,” Sergeant Jones replied. “I don’t think they know how to read tracks, though they’d have had to be blind not to see the snowmobile track.”

The sheriff nodded once more. “I think we’d better pay Master Guns a visit. Whatever he found, it may have put his life in danger.”

“I’d like to see what he found,” Detective Hunt added. “That way, we don’t start an argument without knowing what it is we’re arguing about.”

Siraian was reading a book called *Little House in the Big Woods*. Myles remembered it from grade school. Peller was

reading her own book. The book they had chosen for him to read to them was *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. That book gained popularity long after he had turned from reading fantasy novels to technical manuals.

The sound of an engine approaching the driveway made him stop.

"Don't come out until I tell you," he told the girls. "Stay in the kitchen. If you hear shouting, get into the subbasement."

Both looked frightened. He had taken to keeping his FN FNX45 strapped to his hip even after he retired. While Marines debated whether to switch to a 9mm handgun or stick with the trusted 1911 in .45 ACP, he had compromised. The FNX45 combined modern ingenuity with the stopping power of the classic 45 American Colt Pistol round. His trusty Winchester 1912 remained within reach as he opened the door.

"Sheriff," he greeted warmly as the sheriff, detective, and deputy emerged from the Ford Explorer.

"Master Guns," the sheriff replied. "How are you doing?"

“Can’t complain,” Myles replied cautiously. “Do you want to move on to the weather or come to the point?”

Sheriff Mason laughed. “It’s always good to talk to you, Master Guns. Okay, we were investigating a crash site ten miles due north of here. At first, we thought it might be a meteor impact, but we found bits of metal. Two important points: we found tracks from your snowmobile. Second, strange people came in choppers just before we left. Initially, we suspected it was the U.S. Government, but they didn’t seem to know what they were doing. I believe you found something, and I suspect you are the next person they’ll be visiting. Normally, I’d respect your privacy, but it looks like whatever you took from the site will have dangerous people looking for you.”

Myles did not feel surprised. The sheriff was a Marine officer; Myles had broken him in for the Raiders. He was always sharp, and someone he had trusted back in the day. He wanted to trust him now. His deputies were good people. He knew Sergeant

Jones had twins, a boy and a girl. He took his hand off the grip of his pistol.

“Major,” he said, reverting to the sheriff’s former rank. “You know I’ve always trusted you and that you’ve been willing to hear me out, even you wore butter bars as a second lieutenant.”

The sheriff grinned. “You kept me alive, Master Guns. Without your guidance, I wouldn’t have survived to become a captain.”

Myles sighed. “It will be easier to just show you.”

Myles did not know what they expected to see when they entered his kitchen. Monsters. Galaxy-shattering weapons.

The sight of two little girls reading was certainly not on the list.

“Girls,” Myles began. “Sheriff Mason is an old friend of mine. This is Detective Helen Hunt, who is really good at figuring out what’s going on. Sergeant Jones is good at figuring out mechanical things and is almost as good as I am.”

The two girls stared for a moment, then giggled.

“Sheriff, deputies, may I introduce Siraian and her sister Peller?”

“You know,” Detective Hunt ventured. “When they wiggle their antennae, they’re absolutely adorable.”

“Okay,” the sheriff said, “this wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“Coffee?” Myles inquired.

“Please. And take it from the top.”

The sheriff, deputies, and Myles stood at Ezellor’s grave.

“I gave my word, Major,” Myles declared firmly.

“Like everyone who knows you,” Sheriff Mason said, “I know once you give your word, you will keep it. I don’t trust those clowns in the helicopters, however. If they’re CIA, I’ll eat their chopper.”

“Master Guns,” the sergeant chimed in. “I don’t know how long we can keep this secret. I also don’t know how the eggheads in intelligence will react when they realize you have two real live aliens living with you.”

“It occurred to me, Sergeant.”

“Those guys from the copters scream cartels,” the detective chimed in. “I’d hate to think of what they’d do if they got their hands on them.”

Pellera came out and huddled close to Myles. Myles picked her up.

The suggestion of police custody died on Sheriff Mason’s lips. Detective Hunt frowned as Siraian joined them.

“He was our *Dach’an*,” Siraian explained. “Our protector. He died for us.”

Detective Hunt looked at her. “What about your parents?”

“Father died in the war with the Koreg,” she said. “Mother was holding the rear guard when we left our home. She promised she would find us.”

If she survived. Was what everyone thought but did not voice.

“This could come to a head before any of us are ready,” the sheriff said. “I would like to suggest you have as many friends around you as we can manage.”

“Mrs. James won’t be able to stand off the cartels or the government.”

“I was not talking about Mrs. James,” the sheriff said. “Though if they figure out she’s involved, she could be in danger. I still have contact with the old group. Our old unit still has many of the people we’ve trained, and they’re going on leave for a bit.”

Myles looked at him. “How are they going to get here so fast?”

“Let them worry about it.”

Captain Terence Mackall entered the barracks he had chosen as the company’s unofficial briefing room.

The Marine Raiders stood at attention as he entered.

“As you were.”

“What’s up, Captain?” a lance corporal asked. “I was looking forward to going on leave.”

“This is strictly unofficial,” the captain said. “If anyone decides they don’t want to get yelled at, feel free to drop out.”

No one said anything yet.

“Most of you remember Master Gunnery Sergeant Myles Drake.”

Almost everyone nodded in agreement.

“I got a call from Major Mason,” he continued.

“Retired,” the first sergeant piped up.

The captain nodded. “He told me that Master Guns has adopted two little girls that certain people in the cartels have taken an unhealthy interest in.”

“That’s bad, Captain, but shouldn’t the Major’s department be the one handling this?”

“The two girls in question are aliens,” the captain said. “As in science fiction type of aliens. The master gunnery sergeant would be ready to face the cartels barehanded, but the major wants to

get as many friendly faces on Master Gunnery Sergeant Drake's property as possible."

Someone whistled. "The master gunnery sergeant never did things by halves."

A man raised his hand. "Sir, I don't want to rain on everyone's parade, but how do we know these girls are everything they're cracked up to be? Maybe they are manipulating him."

"That's where Corporal Brian comes in."

Everyone looked at the team's K9 handler and Rex, the Belgian Malinois.

"That dog is the best judge of character I know of," the captain went on. "If they are legit, we'll know. If not..."

"Understood, sir," Corporal Brian said.

"If legit," the captain went on, "keep the swear words to a minimum. They're just little girls, after all."

That elicited some laughter.

"So, how are we getting there?" another man ventured.

“We have a friend who can supply us with nonstop transport to Fairbanks,” the captain said. “We want to be wheels-up in thirty.”

“Yes, sir.”

As he was leaving, he saw the Sergeant Major approaching.

“Sir, the colonel wants to see you.”

He let out an internal groan.

Lieutenant Colonel Montgomery gave the captain a stern glare as he entered.

“You are preparing for some extracurricular activity in Alaska, Captain.”

The captain hesitated and replied, “Yes, sir.”

“You realize that using Corp resources for personal missions is forbidden,” the lieutenant colonel warned. “You could end up in the brig. I could end up sitting next to you for okaying this.”

“Sir, you know?”

The colonel gave a humorless laugh. "When things happen around here that I don't know about, then you can worry."

"How much have you figured out?"

"That Master Gunnery Sergeant Drake and Major George Mason may face trouble involving cartels."

The captain took a deep breath and spilled the rest of it. The colonel's eyes were wide with astonishment.

"I can't give official permission for this, Captain," the colonel stated.

"Unofficial?"

The colonel smiled. "I wish it were as simple as saying I had no idea what you were up to. On the other hand, after Ms. Armato died... I always felt Myles deserved some happiness."

He stood up and looked out the window. "Captain. Join your men. Once you've established what's going on, send me a SITREP. Then, I'll talk to the general and hope he doesn't have all of us stood up against the wall and shot."

“Sir, if I may, things may be bigger than anyone realizes,” the captain said. “If the cartels are involved. Who’s behind them? We may need more help.”

“Noted,” the colonel said. “Now get going before I change my mind.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sheriff Mason ensured that at least one of his deputies checked in on Mrs. James and kept one or two stationed at Myles’s cabin. The girls quickly charmed the deputies, particularly those who had little girls of their own.

Myles moved about the cabin, always keeping a watchful eye on everything. The sheriff ensured he received update on the progress of his old team.

“Master Guns,” Sergeant Jones called from the front.
“Vehicle coming.”

Myles frowned. The team’s arrival time was approaching, but something felt off.

A black limousine made its way up the snowy, gravel-covered road, looking out of place in this climate. Myles felt for FNX45 strapped to his side. With a glance, he signaled to the girls that this was serious. Detective Hunt led them into the hidden root cellar.

Myles picked up his old H&K 416, which still had its full-auto setting.

A man exited the car. Without acknowledging the deputy's challenge, he walked to the back door and opened it. A figure emerged from the vehicle, dressed in a three-piece suit. The man looked vaguely familiar.

"So, Mr. Drake—" he started.

Myles cut him off with a gesture. "That's Master Gunnery Sergeant Drake to you."

Myles's voice was icy. He felt a familiar sense of hostility, the same sensation he experienced when visiting Armato Industries all those years ago. He also remembered seeing this man there.

The man let out a sinister laugh. "Once a marine, always a marine, they say."

Myles narrowed his eyes. "You're on private property. I am armed, and I will defend myself. State your business."

"Please, Myles," the man said. "I may call you Myles? You are not in a position to care for little girls, especially Xialarian little girls. Why not just hand them over and move on with your life?"

If the man expected Myles to be rattled, he was disappointed.

"Why did you remove my name from the Christmas party list Mr. Armato had prepared?"

"Ah, you figured that out, did you?" the man said. "I knew you were too clever by half. I figured you would be a threat to my background operations. If I had been aware of your ingenuity, I might not have made such a mistake."

Several things clicked all at once. It was all Myles could do to resist gunning down this fiend where he stood.

He looked at the men accompanying this man. While professionally dressed, all of them wore the facial tattoos of a notorious cartel.

“Whom do I have the misfortune of addressing?” Myles said through gritted teeth.

“Where are my manners?” the man asked. “Mark Levois, at your service.”

“So, Mark Levois,” Myles continued. “I have a simple inquiry for you. Would you kindly explain why you had Anna Armato killed?”

Mark Levois behaved as though he was unaware of his peril.

“She figured too much out,” he sneered. “Then, it was just a matter of slipping Mr. and Mrs. Armato a drug to induce heart failure at the wake.”

Myles switched the safety to semi-auto.

“There are many women out there,” Mark went on. Myles saw shapes moving through the forest—hostile yet clumsy. “I have never understood people who settle on one.”

“Sergeant! Take cover.”

Myles dropped to one knee. As much as he wanted to kill this monster, he was not the most immediate threat. He fired rounds into his chauffeur and two bodyguards as the rest burst from the tree line. Sergeant Jones grabbed Myles’s shotgun and provided supporting fire. Myles switched to full auto using controlled bursts. The cartel members were vicious thugs, but they were not the trained warriors he and Sergeant Jones were.

“Check our six,” Myles ordered.

The cartel men wavered. Then gunfire erupted from behind the cabin.

Fueled by the promise of reinforcements, the thugs charged forward. Suddenly, more gunfire erupted behind them. It was a brief, violent clash. The remaining gang members realized the Marine Raiders had them outmatched. The survivors surrendered.

Master Gunnery Sergeant Myles Drake advanced toward Mark Levois, who had thrown himself flat when the shooting started. With the shooting over, he rolled onto his back to be

confronted by the muzzle of Myles's rifle. The man who always relied on his suit, cunning, and friends in low places to get what he wanted now confronted a former warrior who was prepared to paint the forest with his blood.

“Deputy,” Mark cried, “you can't let him kill an unarmed man.”

The sergeant pondered this thought for a moment. “Master Gunnery Sergeant, is he worth it?”

“California doesn't enforce the death penalty.” Myles aimed at Mark's face. “Mr. Levois, have you ever heard of the canoe? It isn't an official military means of executing someone, but it gets the job done.”

“Master Guns, Stop!”

Marine Raiders emerged from the forest, with Sheriff Mason and Captain Montgomery in the lead.

A furry missile raced ahead and bared its teeth at Mark, as if to inform him that being shot was not the worst way to die.

Corporal Brian called the dog back to his side.

Sheriff Mason placed his hand on Myles's shoulder. "You have two little girls to take care of."

"He killed Anna." Myles's voice was hoarse as he relived the trauma of losing her.

"Trust me, he will pay for his crimes," the sheriff assured him.

Detective Hunt led the girls onto the porch of the cabin as the Sheriff's department Ford Explorers arrived to take charge of the cartel survivors.

The sheriff whispered something to one of his deputies, then shouted to Mark Levois so the gangsters could hear, "Thank you, sir. I don't know how we could have caught them without your help."

Myles watched the glares as the sheriff's deputies escorted the man past the thugs to a waiting SUV.

"Make sure this lot gets their phone calls."

Once the deputies removed the gangsters, the sheriff smiled at Myles. "I have a feeling he won't make out of Alaska. At least gangland slayings make for easy paperwork."

Rex walked up to the porch and started sniffing the two girls. Siraian and Pelleria appeared apprehensive at first, but then Rex began licking them. The two giggled.

"Well, that settles that." Corporal Brian whistled for Rex to return.

Myles patted the dog. "Hey Rex. How's the world's deadliest lap dog."

"Getting old, Master Guns," Corporal Brian grinned. "Looking to retire to being just a dog."

"Well, Master Guns," the captain broke in. "If you needed someone to arrive in the nick of time, you could have called the army AirCav."

"Believe me, sir. I'm not complaining."

The two girls raced to Myles and wrapped their arms around him. He held them close.

Agent Miranda McLeod felt the helicopter speeding toward the target.

“The Raiders have secured the perimeter,” the Green Berets colonel stated.

“He needs to surrender those two girls to the US Government,” she muttered, as if trying to convince herself.

The colonel raised an eyebrow. “We’ll leave you to fight your own battles, Agent McLeod. From what I hear, you may have one.”

That thought made her feel nauseous.

As soon as the chopper landed, she deplaned and marched toward the cabin. “Where is Master Gunnery Sergeant Drake?”

“In the cabin,” one marine corporal said. “Last I saw, he was reading Harry Potter to the girls.”

She nodded and walked toward the cabin. A marine exited as she brushed past. When she arrived in the living room, she stopped short.

The master gunnery sergeant had the book open in his lap, with the two girls curled up beside him. He had begun reading to them before he and the girls dozed off. Someone had wrapped a blanket around them.

They say that once someone is asleep, you can see into their soul. Miranda saw the children's innocence and the retired marine's protectiveness. She closed her eyes, turned, and crept out the door. She found the colonel talking to the Marine Raider company commander.

"I need to get in touch with FBI headquarters," she said sheepishly. "My superiors need to do a rethink."

The captain turned to the colonel, who reached into his pocket and handed him a fifty. "Marines. I should know better."

After forty-eight hours, Myles's property resembled a military outpost. Other special operations units arrived: DEVGRU SEALs (formerly Team 6), Rangers, and Recon Marines. Most of them rushed to help upon hearing the situation. To protect a veteran's

new family and check out two alien kids who looked cute when their antennae wiggled.

The intelligence service recognized that taking the children would not be practical. They sent Agent Caroline Neckus to assess the situation. A grandmother herself, she learned about the girls' culture by making it fun for the kids.

Sheriff Mason returned with news that they had found Mark Levois's body in Juneau. It was not for the squeamish.

They gathered around Myles's table while the girls played with Rex under Corporal Brian's supervision.

"As I saw things, Master Guns, while I could have made up an excuse, letting you kill him would have been revenge, not justice," the sheriff explained. "Someone like him getting the death penalty... Well, with political ideologies shifting as they do, he would be on appeal for decades. Someone might have commuted his sentence, possibly even pardoned him. Now, letting those people believe he'd helped us round up the gang, well... what

cartels do to people they think double-crossed them. I consider that justice for someone like Mr. Levois.”

Mrs. James nursed a cup of coffee. “So, what happens to the girls now?”

Miranda, who was also enjoying the coffee and one of Mrs. James’s cookies, shrugged. “Agent Caroline Neckus is a wily one. She realized these kids required something that only the master gunnery sergeant could provide. For now, she’s exchanging stories designed to give us a clearer picture of their culture.”

Myles gazed out the window as Pelleria tossed a ball for Rex. He rocketed after it, caught it on the first bounce, and brought it back to her. Siraian was chatting with Corporal Brian. Suddenly, the two girls froze. Siraian grabbed her sister’s hand, and they sprinted toward the cabin, with Rex and the corporal close behind.

The girls burst into the cabin.

“Myles,” Pelleria cried. “Momma is coming.”

This declaration hit Myles like a blow. “I guess you’ll be leaving soon.” He tried to sound as if his heart was not about to break.

Siraian caught her breath. “Koreg ships are orbiting near us. She’s coming as fast as she can, but—”

“We’re going to have to hold them off until then,” the sheriff stated.

Myles was already putting on his body armor and grabbing his H&K 416. “Mrs. James, you take my shotgun. Keep the girls safe.”

Siraian and Pelleria grabbed him. “Please, Myles, the Koreg are monsters. They’ll kill you.”

Myles knelt and held them close. “My job is to ensure your mother can take you home. I’ve faced danger many times before. If these Koreg think this will be easy, they have another think coming. You two listen to Mrs. James, the detective, and Miranda.”

The three women guided the girls deep into the cabin. Myles met Agent Neckus as she entered.

“We have enemy aliens incoming,” Myles said. “Stay with the girls.”

The woman nodded and joined them. The rumble of approaching alien spaceships had everyone scanning the sky. While their enemy possessed superior weaponry, the various special operators were no strangers to defying the odds. The colonel issued orders with a glance. Everyone understood what they needed to do and where the enemy would be most vulnerable. Impossible odds were nothing new.

Myles stood beside the colonel.

“Do you think we can take them, Master Guns?”

Myles narrowed his eyes. “Their toughest armor would be for hostile worlds. Uncomfortable, but safest. No armor, suicide. What they’ll use will be equivalent to what we use. Protect the vitals, but allow them to move. Then, it depends on what compromises their technology allows. With luck, if 5.56 and .308

can't penetrate their breastplate, joints and extremities would be vulnerable."

A crack resonated, and a black ship materialized above them. An energy bolt struck down, perilously close to the cabin.

A Ranger hoisted a MANPAD anti-aircraft missile. A hatch on the ship opened and figures descended. The missile threaded the needle and exploded inside the ship. It veered away and augured into the ground.

"That's what you get when you don't respect private property," the colonel remarked.

"There are more coming," Myles noted.

"Two on the ground!" someone shouted.

They watched as the small arms struck the breastplate of the ten-foot-tall monstrosities. Confirming the strength of the armor, someone shifted to the face shields. After several rounds hit, the shield shattered, and the first alien fell. The second gurgled as a round found the joint in its neck.

"A good call, Master Guns."

Additional enemy ships emerged above. This time out of the reach of the MANPADs.

“They won’t make that mistake again,” the colonel noted.

“Is everything set up as I asked?” Myles asked.

The colonel grinned at him. “Leave it to a Marine to want to water his snow at a time like this.”

Myles grinned back as more black shapes descended from the sky before the ships pulled back.

Myles pulled his helmet over his head. “Let’s let them know just how much we disapprove of bullies.”

The colonel thumbed his comm. “Break them open.”

The operators knocked over, shot at, or blew up various buckets, barrels, and barriers. Water rushed down the slopes surrounding the property, freezing by the time it reached the bottom.

Fire erupted again. Calls began ringing out as soldiers fell back to cover, presenting a tempting target for the Koreg. They

raced after the fleeing humans, who knew the safe paths up and down the various slopes of the undulating ground.

Myles found his position and set the scope to maximum. A Koreg, decorated more than the others, roared orders. As the creature turned, Myles pulled the trigger, unleashing a short burst. Cracks formed a spiderweb pattern on the visor before it shattered. The creature slumped to the ground.

Enraged, the enemy charged ahead, only to lose their footing and slide down the hill. Realizing their danger, the next Koreg halted, but those behind them crashed into their back, sending even more tumbling down. M60 machine guns took over, the heavier bullets having an easier time penetrating the armor.

Just when the remaining Koreg thought the worst was over, SEALs and Green Berets emerged from behind, firing as they advanced.

The fight was not entirely one-sided. Advanced weapons did act as a leveling mechanism. Learning from their mistakes, the follow-up forces flanked the human defenders. Myles watched in

horror as a small strike team, led by a Koreg in heavy armor, landed near the cabin and charged the door. The humans pivoted to hold them off, but it was too late. The aliens breached the door, and gunfire erupted in the house.

Myles was on his feet and running, his crampons making short work of his ice barriers. Trying not to think about the women who had attempted to defend them, Myles charged after a group of Koreg, holding two tiny, struggling forms. Stopping to take careful aim, he fired a bullet into the neck joint of the Koreg holding Peller. The girl hit the ground and remained still. The leader and the remaining Koreg soldiers fled with Siraian. Someone emerged from the cabin and gathered up Peller. Fire from Recon snipers further diminished the leader's guard.

"She's okay," Detective Hunt called.

Myles did not answer. He raced after the Koreg, who had Siraian. Fury and desperation spurred him on. Their heavy armor and the struggling child slowed the Koreg. Myles took a chance and veered onto a path that he hoped would intersect with the

Koreg. He knew where the nearest clearing was where their ships could pick them up. He also knew the trail went past a pond and that, not knowing the terrain, the Koreg would follow it as the path of least resistance.

Myles prayed he guessed correctly. His lungs burned, but he ignored it. His focus was on rescuing Siraian. The Koreg leader and one guard were all that remained. Myles realized he was out of ammo. He dropped his rifle and drew his FNX45. He aimed the red dot at the subordinate and fired three rounds. The heavier .45 ACP bullets shattered the faceplate and the skull of the Koreg. Myles never slowed down, even as the leader pulled Siraian in front of him like a shield.

Myles released the pistol as he barreled into the creature. Siraian fell to the ground.

“Run!” Myles stayed focused on his enemy.

The girl did not waste time arguing. She raced back to the cabin.

Myles dodged the blade that the creature wielded. It swung again, trying to cut him in half. With the creature's back toward the pond, Myles ducked under the third swing and slammed into the creature again. Both toppled into the pond, the ice shattering beneath them. The Koreg's weight dragged them both down. Myles defended his neck and drew his Kabar dagger as the creature attempted to strangle him. He slashed as its massive hand reached for him again. Bubbles erupted from the creature's mouth as it tried to roar in pain. Myles wasted no time; he stabbed into the neck joint of the creature's armor with all his remaining strength. The armor-weave resisted for a moment, then gave way. Blood gushed from the wound, and seconds later, the Koreg leader went limp.

Almost spent, Myles pushed to the surface only to be stopped by ice. He forced himself not to panic and searched for the entry point. His lungs were now on fire. There was a splash as another figure entered the water. Myles kicked over to it as his vision darkened. Someone grabbed his hand.

The next moment, he found himself gasping on the shore.

“A near thing, Master Guns,” a SEAL Master Chief Petty Officer said. “Good thing I thought to tie a rope to myself before I went in after you.”

“I have your rifle and pistol,” another SEAL called. “Wow! The old .45 still does nice work.

Myles nodded as shivering set in.

“Get him onto the stretcher,” the master chief commanded.

Myles shivered more intensely, wondering if he would ever feel warm again. He fought to keep from drifting off. Familiar cries of distress urged him to hang on.

“Let’s get him inside, into something dry, and something warm in him,” the master chief said.

“Mrs. James?” Myles managed.

“Those things grazed her,” he heard the colonel say.

“Thankfully, she’ll recover. Miranda has a dislocated shoulder. We lost Caroline.”

The yard seemed fuller than he remembered. He fell back, the world pulling away.

“Stay with us, Master Gunnery Sergeant,” the colonel commanded.

“We’ve got a warm bath ready,” Detective Hunt sounded far away.

He felt rough hands stripping away his gear and clothes. The next thing he knew, people gently lowered him into something comfortably warm.

An accented voice said, “Drink this.”

Myles obediently sipped the beverage. Warmth spread through his limbs. He found Sheriff Mason, Captain Montgomery, and an alien that resembled Siraian and Peller.

“The hypothermia is passing,” came the mechanical sound of the alien’s translator. “I am the chief physician for Lissara’s family.”

“Thank you, sir,” Myles replied.

The extraterrestrial doctor smiled. "No. Thank you, warrior. Once you're rested, the Lady Lissara would like to speak to you."

Myles looked at the sheriff. "How bad?"

"We suffered fifteen percent casualties," Sheriff Mason said soberly. "We paid them back with interest."

"You should have seen it," the captain added. "They nearly captured Siraian again. Rex came out of nowhere. The alien didn't know what hit him. I'm afraid we lost Corporal Brian."

"What happens to Rex now?"

"We're talking to our superiors about that," the captain stated. "Since you're in the bath, the girls are trying to comfort him."

"Okay," the physician said. "Let's get him dry and into some clean clothes. Royal conversations can wait until tomorrow."

During the night, Myles woke to find he was not alone. Siraian and Pelleria had cuddled up next to him, and he also discovered Rex keeping his feet warm. Sensing Myles's

movement, Rex looked at him with a soulful expression, as if to ask, "*What happens now?*"

He reached down and stroked the dog's head to reassure him. Then, as if by mutual consent, they drifted back to sleep.

Warm light flooded through the window. Myles's movements woke the girls and Rex.

Siraian threw her arms around him. "We were so scared."

Pellera mirrored her sister but remained silent.

"I've been doing things like this since I was eighteen," Myles assured them. "I still have a few good fights left in me. Just like Rex here. Right, boy."

Rex sat up and barked in agreement.

"You and Rex were so brave!" Siraian exclaimed.

"We were fighting for the people we cared about," Myles told them, "and we weren't alone."

"Mommy is here to take us home." Pellera gazed at him with an air of innocence.

Myles's heart tightened. He reminded himself that this was only supposed to be temporary. Now that the moment had arrived, he wished he could be with them a little longer.

"Well, you belong with your mommy," Myles assured them, trying not to sound sad.

The two girls gave him a curious look.

"Why don't you go to the kitchen?" Myles asked. "I'll join you as soon as I'm dressed."

The two girls and Rex left the room. Myles put on his clothes and composed himself.

Upon entering the kitchen, he found Mrs. James making pancakes. Given that this was Alaska, she warmed birch syrup and served it to the guests, who found places to eat around the property.

"I wish I had a bigger kitchen," Myles apologized.

“It’s worth it, Master Guns,” a SEAL said, balancing a tray with pancakes, coffee, and bacon. “Home-cooked tastes just as good outside.”

“I’ve got everything organized,” Mrs. James called. “Just grab a plate and relax.”

Rex chewed a biscuit between the two girls. A woman who looked enough like them to be their mother sat nearby with her own plate.

She set hers aside and walked up to Myles.

“I owe you everything,” the woman said. “My little ones have told me of your kindness and courage.”

Myles flushed. “It was my pleasure. I didn’t realize how lonely I’d been until they came into my life.”

The woman cocked her head and studied him, as if weighing his words. “Would you consider taking on the role of *Dach’an* and being their protector? It affords you a special place in the family. It will mean leaving Earth and coming to our home.”

Myles was at a loss for words. He scanned the room for guidance.

“It’s up to you, Master Gunnery Sergeant,” the colonel said.

Rex got up and nudged his hand, prompting Myles to stroke his head.

The captain cleared his throat. “We’re retiring, Rex. I was hoping you’d agree to give him a home wherever you end up. He seems to like the girls. I suggested a trainer review a few things with you. If you decide to accept this offer, he can be here before you leave.”

“Please, Myles.” Peller took his other hand. “I told Mommy you need us to take care of you.”

Myles laughed and bent down to take her into his arms.

“Okay, I accept.”

The girls and their mother gave him a smile that said he had not made a mistake.

Myles stood on the ramp of the alien ship, while Siraian had the honor of holding Rex's leash.

The remaining operators from the various branches had said their goodbyes. The trainer stood with the sheriff, Mrs. James, and the colonel.

"Well," Myles said, "this is it."

"I'll make sure the cabin stays in good condition," the sheriff promised. "You might need a vacation at some point."

"Take care of Rex," the trainer said. "Remember what I taught you."

"We will," Siraian said. "He is a brave dog. He will have a place of honor among us."

"Just make sure he doesn't get bored," the trainer warned.

Myles exchanged smiles with Lady Lissara. "We wouldn't want him converting the palace into the latest in modern art."

"His skills may prove useful from time to time," Lissara agreed. "Thank you all for everything."

Mrs. James hugged Myles and then embraced the children.

“Take care of yourselves.”

They turned and walked onto the ship.

How much the ship surpassed anything he had seen in science fiction films left Myles amazed.

He sat down with the girls on either side of him. A signal from Siraian prompted Rex to lie at her feet. The ship’s engines came to life.

“Now,” Lissara turned to him. “It’s time to go home. I hope we can make it your home as well.”

Myles smiled as two tiny hands found their way into his.